# Christian Re-Union

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## A SERMON

BY

REV. L. MASON CLARKE, D.D.,
MINISTER, FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
BROOKLYN :: NEW YORK

ON THE OCCASION OF THE VISIT OF

CANON H. HENSLEY HENSON, D.D.,
OF WESTMINSTER, RECTOR OF ST. MARGARET'S, LONDON

TO BROOKLYN

AND HIS APPEARANCE IN THE PULPIT OF THE

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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MAY THE NINTH,
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**"And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three, and the greatest of these is love."—I Corinthians xiii, 13.**

Two very different considerations have seemed to make this particular scripture the pre-eminently appropriate text for us this morning.

I

In the first place, we are to welcome to this pulpit this afternoon, a distinguished clergyman of the Church of England, who, to a peculiar degree, is the apostle of "godly union and concord,"—a prophet-preacher who from time to time stands in the venerable Abbey of Westminster, clothed with the grace of a noble fraternalism, pleading with the great national Church of which he is a conspicuous leader, for a recognition of true Christian discipleship and for an honorable fellowship with all communions on a basis of Christian character, Christian life and Christian efficiency, apart from any long cherished and stoutly maintained traditions of regularity of organization.

As the rector of St. Margaret's also, Canon Henson is the minister of that Church which for three centuries has been the sanctuary within whose walls the oldest free legislative assembly in the world has been accustomed to gather, sometimes officially, sometimes unofficially, to listen to the preaching of



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the Gospel. St. Margaret's is the Speaker's Church, as it is often called, in which the members of Parliament have their traditional rights and privileges. It was there the Solemn League and Covenant between England and Scotland was accepted and subscribed by the Parliament and the Westminster Assembly on the memorable 25th of September, 1643. While we are not concerned either to approve or to disapprove all the specific courses which the signers of that Covenant afterwards pursued, yet to-day we are the direct heirs of that liberty which by the efforts and sacrifices of these men, notwithstanding their failures and mistakes, they secured, defended and handed on to their children and to their children's children. Fittingly the present rector of that historic Church embodies the spirit of union. Fittingly too, most fittingly, as Canon of Westminster, that shrine of England's greatness, where the catholicity of intellect, of heroism and of genius is commemorated in the very heart of Empire, Dr. Henson also represents the large and splendid catholicity of religion. He thus perhaps to a peculiar degree represents the liberty and the unity of the Christian faith. And then as a leader of the new social movement in the Anglican Church, he seeks to bring this large and generous spirit of religion to the massed problems of the toiling souls who are without the visible Church of our common Lord and Saviour.

## II

But I said that there is another consideration which also leads us naturally to our text to-day. If

it be a consideration that is suggested rather by the contrast it affords more than by any similarities it presents, it is none the less illumining and instructive.

Everywhere around us there is being celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, a man whose influence has been one of the most powerful factors in developing the institutions and ideals of England, Scotland and America.

There are few names in modern history which arouse, on the one hand, such ardent admiration, and, on the other hand, such intense detestation as the name of Calvin. Few men have been more revered and few more hated. Yet, in order either to admire or to hate a man intelligently, it is eminently proper that we should try to appreciate him.

At least there seems to be little doubt that in no small measure we owe our modern liberties to the work and influence of this mighty man. Certain it is, at any rate, that for two hundred years or more, if anywhere in Europe there was a community which was abhorred by tyranny, if in England, Scotland, France or Holland there were people who were the special objects of despotic wrath and indignation, those people were Calvinists. We are familiar too with various eulogies which have been pronounced upon this leader of that second and darker period of the Reformation era,—pronounced by men who could have had no sympathy with the theology with which the name of Calvin has been properly identified. Mr. Bancroft, the historian of America, himself a Unitarian, calls him "the guide of Republics." Mr. Froude who held no brief for any particular brand of theology,

praises him as the inspirer of modern freedom. Motley, Hume and Buckle are all in much the same strain. Besides, as the great Church of which we here form a humble part, together with others closely allied to us by ties of historical development, traces its form of doctrine and worship to the personality and teachings of this man, it can hardly be considered out of place if in this fourth centennial year of Calvin's birth we recall certain truths which, it seems to me, need to be remembered.

For example, if our Communion has ever stood for anything in history on behalf of education,—and I am confident you will agree that it has,—it owes this fact in large measure to the impulse of this pre-eminent intellect of the Reformation Age. Or, if as Americans we are interested in the origins of our own nation we shall need to take account of the influence of Calvin in the formation of this government.

## III

But at the outset we are confronted with this interesting fact, that all of this man's influence upon political institutions and civil liberty, upon democratic ideals and republican government, is, as one of his biographers tells us, a by-product, not an intended and clearly designed result of Calvin's teaching. He himself was no democrat. "I am far from denying" he says, "that the form of government which greatly surpasses the others is aristocracy." It is however worth observing that when he taught and lodged in the heart of his teaching that "subjection to rulers is always to be a subjection *in the Lord*," he unde-

signedly sowed the seed of freedom of conscience and planted unknowingly the tree of republican liberty in the soil of the modern world. It is therefore an interesting fact that the most abiding result of this forceful and masterful character is a result unintended and unforeseen. The thing he intended is passing away. He thus affords a significant illustration of a man who builds better than he knows. He is an instance of one whose first and controlling purpose has been broken up into a multitude of unlooked-for influences which still bless the world, though the chief purpose of the man has had its day and ceased to be. The theology of Calvin in its original form, as a system of belief has practically passed away and no longer obtains any general acceptance as a considerable force and power among us, while the influence of Calvin is one of the most wholesome and invigorating factors of our modern life.

## IV

If it is popularly imagined that the Presbyterian Church is Calvinistic in its doctrine to-day, such an opinion can be entertained only by those who do not appreciate the difference between original Calvinism and the present faith of the Church. Surely it is only in a very modified sense that the belief of this denomination which perhaps especially counts Calvin as a spiritual and intellectual ancestor, can be called Calvinistic now. The revised summary of doctrine accepted and adopted by our Church a few years ago is not Calvinism but instead, it contains elements which Calvin would not have endorsed and it omits

elements which he insisted were essential to his "System."

His teaching of the sovereignty of God has been gradually modified into the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God, which is a very different thing. This is now the organizing principle of our present theology. That infinite Will which in Calvinism foreordained evil as well as good, because it pleased and had the power so to do, has become quite another conception in modern faith, where it now is seen to be *good will*, the name of which is not Power but Love. Every one of the distinctive teachings of Calvin has been so worn away under the influence of what Paul calls in our text the "greatest," that the change has been more like a revolution than an evolution. His view of human nature as totally depraved is nowhere taught and cherished as an article of modern Christian Faith, or if it does still lurk in any quarter as a theoretical belief, it is not the faith that governs men's actions and procedure in the proclamation of the Gospel. Instead, the message is preached as to men who, though they may be wandering children of their heavenly Father, are yet children who may turn again to their Father's house. No paralysis of predestination withers the present appeal to the human will. Still further, Calvin's doctrine of the hard decrees of Calvin's God has passed away by reason of the truer conception of the revelation of the real God in the person of the real Jesus. So it is that each of the "five points" of Calvinism has been changed or left behind. Every feature of his theology which was essential to his rigorous "system" has been so modi-

fied until the faith of our Church to-day, in common with the faith of Christendom, bears slight resemblance to the original Calvinism of four centuries ago. The witty paraphrase of a familiar stanza is not untrue to fact, —

> "We are not divided,
> All one body we,
> Wesley's God is sovereign,
> And Calvin's man is free."

## V

Now the explanation of such significant changes is not difficult.

It would be strange indeed if in four hundred years the knowledge of Christian truth had not increased under the promised tutelage of the Spirit of God, if the theology of men had not advanced even as the world has gone forward in all other departments of thought and life. It would be a sad result of four more centuries of Christian experience if the Church thought and felt and believed to-day as it did in Calvin's time. With the enlarged view of the world, with the new enthusiasm for humanity, with the altered conception of history, of nature, and of the human soul, it would be terribly strange if we had no better thoughts of God. And this entire result which is so evident to us the instant we state to ourselves what Calvinism really was, is due to the gradually increasing pressure upon the conscience and heart of men of the comparatively new-found truth that God is Love. What one of our Presbyterian theologians has written is true, namely, that the God of Calvinism is Power. The God of modern

Christian Faith is Love. Calvin never had the conception of a Jesus-like God.

It is usually thought also that Calvinism is absolutely logical as a system. It certainly is emphatically logical *in parts*. However it is not all logic and it dispenses with logic at times. But even were it tight-riveted in every place, it would be none the less impossible as a statement of religious faith to-day. Love can never be interpreted by logical processes alone. Power may be stated in the terms of a syllogism but love never can be thus stated. President Patton once said in this very city that he would not say that a person can not be a Christian without being a Calvinist, but he would say that a person can not be a *logical* Christian without being a Calvinist. But the very point is that there is a great deal more in human nature than intellect and logic. Love is often illogical and it is always, I think, *unlogical*. That is, it does not confine itself to the grooves of reasoning. You can not express or explain your emotions by a major and minor premiss and conclusion. The parable of the Prodigal Son is the despair of logic, but it is also the joy and glory of love!

And thus, like a stately iceberg that comes from an Arctic glacier, glistening and solid-like in its compacted structure, which, when it meets the warmer seas begins to fade and melt and finally dissolves away, yet in its passing contributes elements of vigor to the ocean in which it disappears and to the air above, so I think of the theology of Calvin, symmetrical in its outlines, tremendous in its original energy,

a mighty moving power in the older days of tyranny, yet as it comes to the latitudes of a humaner age it melts and fades, passing as a "system" away in the presence of the great ocean of divine love, but also in passing, it contributes vigor and health to a multitude of intellectual and spiritual interests that still abide. Let no one think therefore that because as a system of theology Calvinism passes away it has not done great work for God and for man. The tonic of its power is in the thought and life of men yet. It has gripped the intellect of as sturdy a race of thinkers as the later world has known. It has been the persistent foe of ignorance and the constant friend of learning. It has also laid its emphasis upon individual character, and it was only an abuse of its message which made it the instrument of an immoral fatalism. Moreover, it has stamped upon men's minds afresh the conviction that there is a divine plan for every life and thus it has given a supreme value to the lowliest soul. These are but few of the results of the Calvinistic interpretation of the Gospel which have gone as lasting elements into the faith of Christendom to-day. It is well indeed to realize these things and to pay our modest tribute to so significant an influence. I can but think also that it is worth while to see our present theological alignment in reference to such an influence, to know what we are in Christian thought and where we are, and to know why we are what and where we are.

VI

But there is more to be said than this. In this beautiful poem on Christian love, this thirteenth

chapter of First Corinthians, St. Paul reveals himself as the great theologian. The old Latin phrase, whoever said it first, "*pectus facit theologum*"—"the heart makes the theologian" certainly fits the apostle who wrote this immortal song. Yet, no one ever laid more stress upon "faith" than did Paul, and he had a clear idea of what he meant by "*the* faith." His was the only trained and disciplined intellect among the earliest followers of the Great Teacher. "Be not children in understanding" he writes to these same Corinthians, "in understanding be men." Also "I will pray and sing in the spirit, but I will pray and sing with the understanding also." But how he penetrates, as with the eye of an experienced prophet, the real secret and genius of religion. "If I have all faith—but have not love, I am nothing." "If I have all knowledge—and have not love, I am nothing." "Knowledge passeth away." "Prophecies shall be done away." "Love *never* faileth." And what is the result? Why, the result is that the nearer we come to this which is the real heart of all theology we come closer to the two great principles of all Truth, Liberty and Unity. There can never be any realized unity without freedom, and freedom can not come to its fullness without realizing unity. The very thing which theology has so often been afraid of and which it has so frequently tried to stifle is thus the very condition of the unity which by other means it has endeavored vainly to secure. The man who seeks to enforce his belief upon another man, by threats or penalties of whatever kind, is insulting the truth he tries to advance. All that truth asks of us is that we

set it free. Only when it is free will its unity appear.

The same holds good of the Church. To-day the Church of Christ is divided into a multitude of sections. Yet we are all coming closer together under the influence of this "greatest thing in the world." The Church seems to be crying out to its leaders and saying "Make me free. If these petty bonds which enslave me and keep my life imprisoned were but severed, then because free I should realize my oneness." Is it not the fact that the things which divide the Church are the things which enslave the Church? Is it not also the fact that the things which unite us all, underneath our dividing lines, are the great elemental unities in which alone our liberties as Christians are lodged? We therefore claim our right to be ourselves and yet to hold visible fellowship with all who serve and love the Imperial Christ,—the LORD, to whom both St. Paul and the apocalyptic writer refer in that carefully chosen word which in the Greek always meant the Emperor. (First Corinthians II : 20 and The Revelation I : 10.)

We will then hold no truth however "historic" it may be in such a way as to disfellowship any one who loves the Lord of all truth. We will refuse to be so exalted by our particular doctrine or Church organization as to exclude from our fraternalism any one who loves the Lover of us all. Nothing but this "greatest" can ever melt away the "least" things which men have made into reasons for dividing the Holy Catholic Church. The unerring mark of such a Church is not any figment of fancied regularity of

organization, not any "system" of theology which it defends against all comers, not any external use or sign, but simply Christian character, Christian service, Christian love. Not the unity of uniformity as the older days attempted with such baleful results and as it lingers still here and there among men, but the unity of variety,—as St. Paul himself might have expressed it, the unity of a spiritual universe, where each part has a glory of its own as the several stars differ in their glory, but where all together they utter forth the manifold grace in harmonious fellowship!

## VII

It is a significant fact that not one of the divisions in the Church of Christ had its origin in a plain and evident word of Jesus or teaching of the New Testament. You can not find the "historic episcopate" until the second century. You read nothing of the Papacy in the Scriptures, and if St. Peter wrote the first epistle that now bears his name, he presents in the fifth chapter a strange protest against it. You can not find Presbyterianism, either as an order of polity or as a Calvinistic confession, in any exclusive possession of divine right, in this sacred record. Not one of the different forms of Church organization extant has any verifiable claim to supremacy on the authority of the New Testament. But what does have such authority? Why, Christian love and fellowship are the notes of the unquestioned message of Jesus and His apostles. The simple things (and yet how hard they are?), the great, splendid elementals of character, these are the constant factors of the

Gospel. This is what men are feeling increasingly to-day. This is bringing the Church closer together, part with part, portion with portion, and nothing, whether ancient prejudice or new born bigotry or mistaken convictions, nothing, whether decrees of Councils or resolutions of Assemblies, can forever prevent the federation in a true and "godly union and concord," of the several communions that worship the Father of us all. We are learning to love each other more and to respect the opinions of those who in unessentials are removed from us. We are no longer trying the impossible task of creating a "system" of theology which is to hold all the truth of salvation in its rigid mould. We have given up the unholy business of pronouncing anathemas upon men of character whose faith is not ours and to whom our faith is meaningless. We are beginning to discover how great love is! We are also learning how various is the truth of God and how big and vast is the human soul!

I take this opportunity of quoting from a deliverance made by the eminent Canon who will preach from this historic pulpit this afternoon. He stood before the University of Cambridge and said, "the time has come for Churchmen to remove the barriers for which they can no longer plead political utility and which have behind them no sanctions in the best conscience and worthiest reason of our times."

Everywhere Christians are already united in the fellowship of sacred science. Scholarship knows no such dividing lines as men have drawn in the name of religion. Devotion brings together men of all

sorts of creeds and we all pray and praise in the language of Romanist, Anglican, Lutheran, Unitarian and Calvinist, Methodist and Quaker. Already when you reach to the real heart of the matter we are one in the victory of liberty, the victory of Christian love! The two must go together towards the realization of the fuller visible unity of the Church. Liberty precedes the unity in the evolution of the Kingdom. Unity is the consummate expression of Christian liberty.

When in days to come the Church of Christ shall achieve by the abundance of her love the union to which she is called, then she will be able to convince the world, as the Saviour promised, but as now she can not do, that "Thou hast sent Me." Then she will fling her new love over the now divided ranks of human struggle and toil and suffering and will draw together by no other force than love, the separated and alienated hosts that now believed or deny outside her sacred fellowship. The appeal of love is the only universal appeal and every one that loveth is born of the universal God. Amen and Amen!

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